

Province's former health minister brings private-sector MRI to BC

Terry Moran

Résumé : Un ancien ministre de la Santé de la Colombie-Britannique a défié le statu quo en ouvrant un centre privé d'imagerie par résonance magnétique à Vancouver. Jim Nielsen, qui était ministre au cours des années 80, à l'époque de l'entrée en vigueur de la Loi canadienne sur la santé, est d'avis que le secteur privé peut réduire les pressions qui s'exercent sur le trésor public sans menacer l'universalité du système de soins de santé du Canada. Paul Ramsey, l'actuel ministre de la Santé, s'oppose toutefois à la privatisation des services de santé en affirmant qu'il ne veut pas qu'on se souvienne de lui comme de celui qui a instauré une médecine à deux vitesses en Colombie-Britannique.

Ten years after the passage of the Canada Health Act (CHA), British Columbia's health minister of the day is back in the thick of things. Although the current minister disapproves, Jim Nielsen and his Riverside Magnetic Resonance Imaging Centre have brought private-sector MRI to Vancouver.

Universality — one of the five pillars of the CHA — notwithstanding, Nielsen cannot understand Health Minister Paul Ramsey's reluctance to accommodate private-sector MRI in BC. If government would stop saying everyone "should ride the same bus," he maintains, there are other high-demand specialties that could work with the private sector to ease the squeeze on the public purse. For example, he foresees private, noncosmetic surgical suites flourishing in Canada within 2 years.

"Our debt is increasing, deficits

are out of control, the dollar is dropping, interest rates are rising, population is increasing, government revenues are declining," Nielsen says. "How can we meet the demand?"

"Canadians are going to have to look to any opportunity where the private sector can help out the public sector in relieving cost pressures. Free enterprise, that's what we're supposed to be all about in North America."

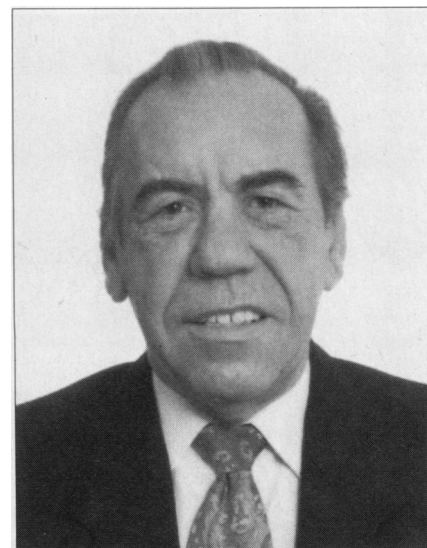
At the heart of the argument between the health ministers, past and present, is sanctioning a two-tier system similar to the one found in the United Kingdom. Many tiers already exist in BC, says Nielsen, who represented the Social Credit Party during his term in office a decade ago. New Democrat Ramsey doesn't deny there are examples of this, but comments: "I don't want to be remembered as the health minister who builds the second tier."

The Riverside MRI Centre, in partnership with Magnetic Resonance Centre of Edmonton and other investors brought aboard by Nielsen,

is strictly a private affair. Its patients will not reclaim any portion of the cost from BC's Medical Services Plan, and the centre is therefore unaffected by what Nielsen describes as a "pointless exercise" in federal-provincial transfer penalties, which he describes as an "infringement upon the provincial jurisdiction of health care management."

Nielsen and Monique Bégin, the Liberal health minister who steered the Canada Health Act through Parliament, frequently locked horns during federal-provincial discussions on the act and BC's chronic shortfall in federal transfer payments. Bégin once described Nielsen's contributions as "barnyard noises."

Today, Nielsen describes her as "a woman on a mission at that time";



Jim Nielsen, former BC health minister

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as for the Canada Health Act, it is "completely irrelevant, as I argued it was then." Under the act's provisions, BC recently had to repay \$750 000 in federal transfer payments because of 44 physicians who opted out of the provincial medicare system last year; they have since ceased their opting-out activities.

BC is turning into a flashpoint for private-sector medicine as well as extra-billing. New Westminster ophthalmologist Don Johnson and his excimer laser procedure, which eliminates myopia at a cost of \$4500, is attracting patients from the US, where the procedure has not been approved by federal regulatory agencies.

Nielsen, who left politics before the 1986 provincial election and subsequently held such high-profile positions as chairperson of the BC Workers' Compensation Board and political commentator for the CBC, says his MRI scans — which cost, for example, \$750 for a brain scan or \$595 for a knee — are 60% of the average cost in the US; he expects to receive his own share of "medical tourists" from south of the border. After just 2 weeks, even before engaging in any marketing, Nielsen was turning away business.

Ramsey is not impressed. "I am opposed to the privatization of health services, and I regret that a former minister of health would establish this

sort of service," the current health minister says. "Scans performed at Mr. Nielsen's facility will not be covered, and users of it should know it well."

The MRI unit that Nielsen has installed in a new suburban industrial park cost \$4 million. He has been assured that keeping up with the innovations in diagnostic modalities will cost a substantial amount as well.

Even MRI may soon be obsolete, Nielsen says, and although he cannot predict what will eclipse it, he knows it will be expensive. "The government doesn't need to come up with this kind of money when there's a private sector that's prepared to take the risk," he says.

Ramsey dismisses the argument that government cannot afford to provide sufficient MRI facilities to serve the need. He says BC is only "about a machine and a half" short of the ratio he'd like to see — about one MRI unit per 500 000 people — and he's "working on it."

"I don't want to see it getting to the point, as it has in the US, where they are down to one machine per 90 000 or 80 000 people and use it for everything from a hangnail on up," Ramsey says. He thinks MRI is becoming the diagnostic modality of choice for more and more commonplace conditions for which x-rays and computed tomography scans would suffice.

However, as Nielsen knows all too well after his 6 years as health minister, the public will settle for nothing less than the best and quickest methods available. During his tenure as minister, BC was one of the provinces to get involved with MRI, lithotripsy, excimer lasers, computerized ambulance dispatch systems and other high-technology developments. Nielsen's arguments then were that the ultimate cost savings from reduced hospital stays and human suffering made the investments worthwhile, and he applies the same arguments today in promoting the Riverside MRI Centre.

Ironically, says Nielsen, the emergence of private-sector MRI in Canada leads to greater universality

in the health care system: "We're not expecting our clientele to be rich people. We like to think of them as people to whom a weekend in Reno is not that great an imposition."

Nielsen originally planned that the centre would focus on diagnostic research. Even though this proved unrealistic, he looks forward to MRI's breakthrough into new areas, such as clinical monitoring of the course of arthritis treatment.

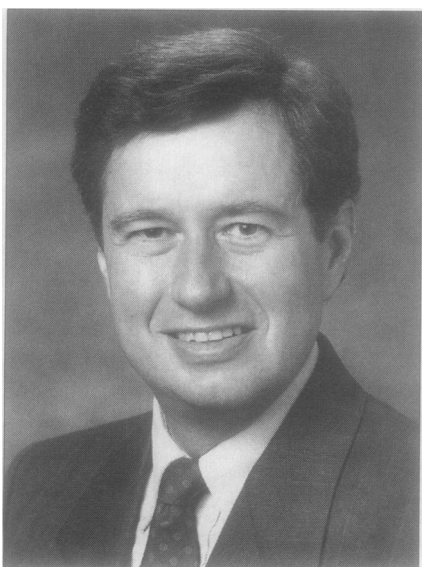
Radiologist Dr. Brian Ho says that in its first weeks of operation, the Riverside centre discovered several serious problems in patients, including a cancerous bowel lesion. Ho's five technicians and support staff handle a caseload of from 4 to 10 patients a day.

Business will probably get better, because Ramsey and the BC government facing an apparently ever-worsening crisis in health care delivery. The province is moving towards *New Directions in Health Care* — a rechanneling of resources into community-based care that was recommended by a provincial royal commission — as the clamour for hospital and medical care increases.

Dr. Paul Bratty, head neurologist at the Vancouver Hospital and Health Sciences Centre, recently resigned in symbolic protest against underfunding; Ken Fyke, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Victoria Hospital Society, says whole hospital departments will have to close in order to achieve 5% cuts ordered by the government.

"Sound familiar?" Nielsen chuckles, recalling his days as the minister of "restraint" for his role in bringing hospital expenditure growth to 2% from 8%. He's much happier seeing Ramsey or someone else coping with the never-ending health care crises.

Had Canadians foreseen 10 years ago that the country would eventually be spending more on servicing the debt than on health care, Nielsen concludes, the private sector would have been allowed to flourish in Canada, and Riverside MRI would not be an outcast today. ■



BC Health Minister Paul Ramsey